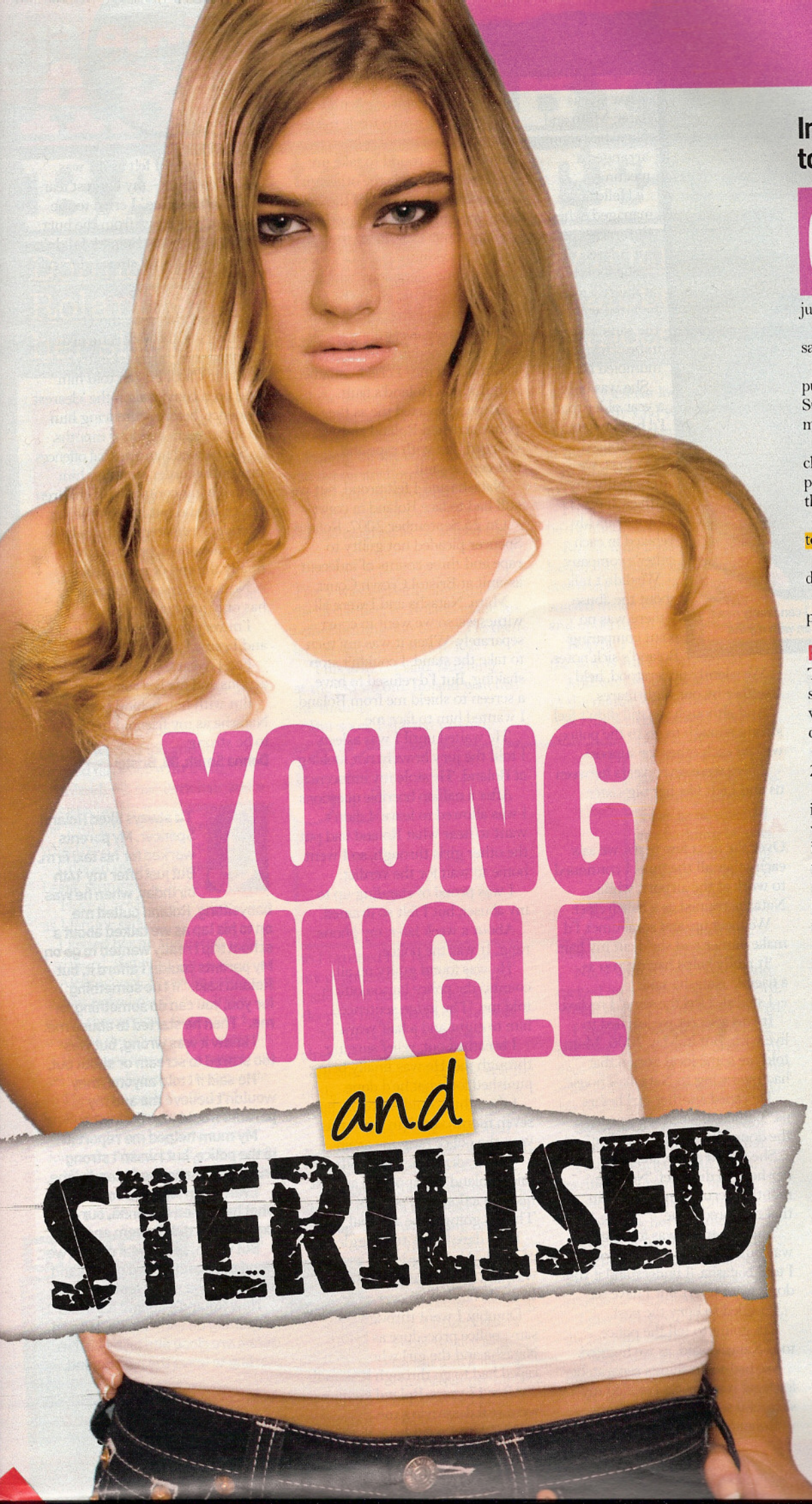

YOUNG SINGLE and STERILISED

Increasing numbers of you to the extreme and being

Clutching her swirling belly, Chloe watches the waiting room clock tick as her mind races. Her appointment is in just 10 minutes. And she's nervous.

'Am I doing the right thing?' she says over and over in her mind.

Just then, she sees a mum pushing a screaming baby outside. Suddenly, she's convinced she's made the right choice.

Chloe isn't at an abortion clinic, terminating an unwanted pregnancy because now isn't the right time to have a child.

The fact is, there's never going to be a right time for Chloe.

She's 100 per cent sure she doesn't want a child. Ever.

And she's so confident, she's paying £1,200 to be sterilised.

Permanent solution

This type of contraceptive surgery is popular among older women who have decided they don't want any more children.

The NHS perform around 21,000 operations each year.

But now there has been a leap in the number of healthy, young women undergoing the procedure in their twenties to ensure they remain child-free forever.

Over the past year, a quarter of the women who booked a sterilisation consultation with women's charity Marie Stopes were aged 30 or under.

A third of those went through with the operation, which involves cutting, sealing or blocking the Fallopian tubes, preventing eggs from travelling to the womb.

The procedure permanently prevents a woman from becoming pregnant.

Chloe is one of these women.

'I've never ever wanted children,' she explains.

'Growing up, all my friends would like to pretend to be mummies. But I hated it.

'By the time I was 18, I knew I was never going to change. I couldn't imagine letting something take over my body and then my whole life.

'I couldn't even look at a baby without feeling uncomfortable.'

Chloe was so passionate about her beliefs, she made an appointment with her doctor

ung women are taking contraception sterilised to stay childless – forever

to discuss the idea of sterilisation.

He told her, at 20, she was too young to have the operation and should use other long-term forms of contraception, such as implants.

'I was so angry,' Chloe remembers. 'No contraception is 100 per cent effective.

'I don't know why, but I have never liked kids. I couldn't risk getting pregnant because I'd have to have an abortion and that could be horrendous. Sterilisation seemed the best option.'

After being turned down for the operation on the NHS, office administrator Chloe found a private clinic that would help her.

'At the clinic, I was given counselling to ensure I was making the right decision,' Chloe explains. 'Then I had to stay in every weekend for a year to save the money I needed, but it was worth it. I've got a lifetime of going out ahead of me now.'

> "I have never liked kids. I couldn't risk getting pregnant. Sterilisation seemed the best option"

In recent years, the NHS has become increasingly reluctant to sterilise women like Chloe, who are under 30 and healthy.

On the majority of occasions, they refuse the operation.

And while clinics like Marie Stopes do not refuse younger women, they do insist on counselling for under-25s.

So, with medical professionals erring on the side of caution, is sterilisation before 30 an unnecessary measure?

'The decision to be sterilised is unique to each and every woman,' says Dr Patricia Lohr, medical director of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS).

'Some may have a genetic disease they don't want to pass on, some may have had children young and can't afford – or don't want – any more. Others may not want children at all.

'It can be an excellent method of birth control. But it should be viewed as a permanent, risky measure that should be thought about very seriously.'

Some experts predict that by 2010, one in four women will be child-free, due to a range of factors, including choice and failure to find the right partner.

But with more women than ever waiting to have children until they are in their thirties or forties, how do those in their twenties really know they will never want kids?

Studies show between three and 10 per cent of women who choose to be sterilised later regret their decision.

And those who were sterilised in their twenties were twice as likely to have second thoughts.

Sadly, these feelings can last a lifetime, as sterilisation reversals are not available on the NHS.

And even if women can afford to have the procedure reversed privately, there's no guarantee it will be a success.

Susan Seenan, from the support group Infertility Network, says young women should think very carefully before being sterilised.

'In your twenties, you really don't know how you're going to feel when you're older,' she says.

'We speak to so many women who have regretted being sterilised. We know exactly how devastating the emotional impact of not being able to have children, when you want them, can be.

'It's doubly devastating when you've taken that choice away from yourself.'

But women like Charlie McCann are certain their decision is for life.

'I helped my sister to give birth and it was an amazing, magical experience,' she explains. 'But I was 100 per cent certain I had no inclination to have a child myself.'

Charlie was sterilised on her 30th birthday and is happy with her choice, insisting the men in her life have to adjust.

'My ex ended things after 15 months as he couldn't handle never having a child,' she confides. 'I loved him deeply and was upset. But I knew it was the right thing to do.'

Charlie's new partner also wants kids, but she's determined her views won't change.

'I'm confident in my decision,' she continues. 'I'm happy being child-free and any man who wants to be with me will have to accept that.'

Thankfully for Charlie, her family and friends supported her.

For others, such as Chloe, the taboo of not wanting children means she has to live a double life.

'I still haven't told my mum she's never going to be a granny, and I don't know if I ever will,' she says.

'Most people don't understand. They either think I'm mad or immature. But I think being sterilised is the most sensible, adult decision I'll ever make.' ■

MORE INFORMATION

- For more information about sterilisaton, call Marie Stopes International on 0845 300 0212, or visit www.bpas.org.
- If you're suffering from fertility problems, contact the Infertility Network on 0800 008 7464.

THE TWENTY-SOMETHING

'I'M RELIEVED KIDS WON'T BE PART OF MY FUTURE'

Jacquelyn Arnold, 30, is a student from Northwest London. She lives with her boyfriend, Jack, 29

'I've made an extreme decision'

Sipping a cup of tea, I watched my friend's toddler tear round the garden. Instead of feeling a twinge of maternal longing, all I felt was irritation.

At 21, the last thing I wanted was kids. For as long as I could remember, I was certain I didn't want to be a mum.

As a little girl, I was never interested in playing mummy like other children, and when I grew up, I became even more determined kids weren't going to be a part of my future.

When I turned 18, I found an article in a magazine about young women who had chosen to be sterilised.

It was like a light switched on in my head. Until then, I thought doctors only sterilised older women with large families. 'That's for me,' I decided.

I was already on the Pill, but it made me feel sick. I'd heard other contraceptives, such as the coil or implants, had similar side effects.

Sterilisation seemed like the perfect option for a child-free future.

I discussed it with my boyfriend, Rob, 27. We'd been together for six months and he was adamant he didn't want kids, either.

'I think it's a good idea,' he reassured me.

I booked an appointment with a private doctor. After I explained I'd thought long and hard about my decision, he seemed satisfied. I was scheduled in for the operation a month later, and relief washed over me.

As I waited for the date to come round, anticipation churned.

When the day of the operation arrived, nurses swathed me in a green gown and I was given a general anaesthetic.

The surgeon made a tiny incision in my naval and clamped a steel ring over my Fallopian tubes to stop eggs being released.

I had two stitches on the incision and 15 minutes later, I was wheeled into the recovery room. For the next two days, I dosed up on painkillers, then I was back at work.

Rob and I stayed together for another five years, but eventually we split up.

I met my current boyfriend, Jack, 29, through friends. Luckily, he was supportive and didn't see children in his future, either.

Nine years on from my operation, I don't have any regrets. Some of my friends have gone on to have kids, and I don't envy them.

I know I've made an extreme decision, but I've taken control of my life. Too many women have babies because they feel they should, and I refuse to be one of them.

WORDS PEETA FELTON PHOTOGRAPHY PHILIP LEWIS DECORAT. CHLOE, JACK AND ROB'S NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED. MAIN PHOTO POSED BY MODEL